

RANDALL SCHMIT

Essay by
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WARPING THE EYE'S MIND

*There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary
The Negation must be destroyed to redeem
the Contraries¹*

Deviation is an elusive measure of complexity. Hallmarks of a perpetual rupture in optical perspective, textual character, and attributed meaning, generate a palimpsest whose nascent significance is revealed in slow-burn increments. *Time*, with its inevitable trail of depredations, exposes *and* unleashes contradiction—in addition to every other probable manifestation of difference *qua* difference. Such as it is, this is—of course—obvious. In fact, it begs a proverbial question: What constitutes a convincing embodiment of *rational* confusion?

Answering this is to simultaneously address Randall Schmit's recent work. Akin to views from the crow's nest of a drunken boat in a tempest, these paintings, in all their fluctuant disarray, unravel, scramble, and remix the terms, ways, and means of pictorial structure. Their vital key, their wobbly pivot, is grounded in the embrace of a titular relativity. While underneath and despite this apparent multivalence, there prevails a singular, unswerving, deterministic and *rationalist* methodology.

Schmit (like some gnostic peering across the enclosing cosmic shells into a limpid chaos) constructs his views with the pell mell confluence of various and numerous planar containers—within each of which *all hell breaks loose*. The resulting multiple, compartmentalized, pandemonium nevertheless manages to compress all this high voltage menace and mayhem into a single extra-logical focus. Fragmentary elements derived from sources as disparate as calligraphy, isometric drawing, figuration, AE, cartoons, and 18th century landscape imagery coalesce and enter into an extended tenuous equilibrium. Framing devices, many of them implying a reflective interior surface, range from the architectonic to surrealist divisions evocative of biomorphic ridges or terrestrial seams.

A fractious heterogeneity exists within and among various areas of optical contraction *and* the territorial limits defining each respective compartmental chamber. It is as if, flirting with the distinct risk of hodge-podge, Schmit juggles and shuffles these chambers up to the brink of a farrago, and then—pulling back in the nick—reconciles the breach. With their disjunctive writhing, squirming, enfolded passages engaged in a sort of selection of the fittest, a reciprocal interaction is nonetheless generated between the competing parts (usually at the margins) which overwhelms the prevailing weight tearing them asunder.



A TABLE'S DISSOLUTE BREATHING, 1990, 70" x 54",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

On occasion, a section of the dividing structure of one chamber will penetrate the interior of an adjacent chamber—mixing in yet an additional order of deviance.

A Table's Dissolute Breathing (1990), manifests the full measure of deviant complexity, and then some. A totemic stack of three bone-white heads dominates the entire picture from an upper-right shaft. The top head, so to speak, gazes imperiously into a labyrinth of division as if to survey its private domain. Though wall-eyed, this top head exudes an atmosphere of confident, unobstructed command. The subdivided turmoil to top-head's left, orbits around an almost dead-center vertical rectangle which reads as *either mirror or portal*. R. Crumb, Ivan Albright and F. X. Messerschmidt immediately slip into mind as precursors to similarly spectrified phantasmagoria. The painting's inward tone and outward shape—from bleak & wintry to tropical exotica—reflect (as if in optimum dialectical flux) each other, reversing symmetry and emphasizing the pending collision of elaborate parallels. Flooded with the pellucid light of an electrical discharge during some Archeozoic thunderstorm, its helter-skelter of irradiated forms burst out from separately positioned haunts, each initiating its own local climate.

The Guest, A Floating River (1991) conjures up an alchemy of opposites. Insectile and metallic configurations vie for

the fugitive center stage, a trapezoidal entablature jutting out, in full tilt, at an obtuse angle to the picture's surface. Resembling parallel non-intersecting universes, the picture's jockeying quadrants appear to be both hermetically sealed *and* reflective of one another. Fortuitous conjunctions provide a plumb line logic interlocking whipsawed architectural motifs that would otherwise fly out of control. Corralled within this Gordian tangle of rambunctious rails and cavorting beacons, are two "figures"; each composed of a swarm of what appear to be animated stalagmites. The more dominant of the two (upper right-center), with its comical yet sinister profile, its hooked beak, and its calcified attitude, takes in the furious panorama of the painting's left half from the vantage of a suspended balcony. This balcony is typical of the architectural motifs that Schmit puts to frequent use. They invariably operate on dual levels. First, as an anchoring device which provides the overall composition with credible enclaves of stability; and second, as an interior framing scheme that encloses distinct territories, and establishes boundaries among the enclaves.

A Monk's Tonic, Meandering Heat (1991) features another vertical shaft harboring an elongated stack of rising and twisting bone fragments. From the right of this shaft, the entire composition seems to heave, rotating clockwise. Once again, a



THE GUEST, A FLOATING RIVER, 1991, 72" x 84",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

rampant disfluency—consonant with sheer chance and the yoke of necessity—unifies a labyrinth of delirious parts, as different from each other as orchids are from anthropoids. Meanwhile, a sulfurous pall hangs over the self-contained portion thrusting up from the lower right corner. It functions as if it were an alien intrusion into the preordained territory of the painting, leaving the viewer confronted with this question: What coordinate system, or frame of reference, determines how a pictorial surface (or a three dimensional object, for that matter) indicates, or signals, the terms by which it is to be “read,” decoded, apprehended, etc.? The designation of one portion of a picture as autonomous from the rest, is revealed exclusively by the facts of juxtaposition, and the inferences drawn from an implicative order in illusionism. But knowing this hardly diminishes the *sensation* of paradox in the viewer when face-to-face with a complex and novel articulation of the principle.

With *The Fortune of a Haunted Mirror* (1991), Schmit explicitly invokes the self-portrait, and with it the concomitant issues of resemblance, verisimilitude and iconic fidelity to the original. As a diptych of very unequal panels, it introduces an audacious wild card into an already volatile repertoire. The smaller right panel, dominated by the stolid three-quarter view of Schmit himself, hangs as an appendage to its

more complex “other.” The resulting torque between this appendage and the “other” panel’s interior divisions, implies an extension (or continuity) of the picture’s activity beyond its physical limits. Central among these various activities is the role of the observer, who, in this curious case, is also the maker. Combining mimetic with hallucinatory elements, asymmetrical and askewed balance with the *finesse* of a natural-random distribution of things, and chromatic intensity with subdued, saturnine, introspection; the painting culminates, sums up, and otherwise recapitulates all of the thematic idioms and methods present in varying degrees elsewhere in Schmit’s work. For instance, the screaming figure reclining on a Baconesque platform in the upper left, levitates above an isometric view of a cubicle enclosing a petrified, ashen gray maelstrom—all in all, a compositional arrangement prototypical of the artist’s signature maneuvers. Yet, in this specific case, the effulgent saturation characteristic of so much of the work, is drawn into a narrative coherence further emphasizing the un-natural, unreal, ambience of the dream state. By employing the cardinal tenets of a pictorial illusionism (originally intended to convey the natural world as faithfully as possible) towards anti-naturalist ends, Schmit opens up segues linking the domain of free floating signifiers with *temporal* states and intervals indicative of



A MONK'S TONIC, MEANDERING HEAT, 1991, 60" x 72",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

intersubjective experience: In doing so, he touches upon one of the classic inversions of reference, vis.: “The imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of material supplied to it by actual nature.”²

Thus, it is the *Dream*, with its mixing of codes, that provides a convincing embodiment of *rational* confusion. Things and visages are simply froth—the floating opera—on the surface of deep currents. If history is indeed the shock-wave of eschatology, then *Time* does indeed leave a predictive stream of depredations in its entropic wake—perpetually threatening to puncture its own flooded ventricles with a fatal incoherence.

There is a vivid urgency, informed by private necessity, in Schmit’s dithyrambic vision. It registers the impression of an exuberance and ferment quite uncommon in a current milieu dominated—as it is—by the cool arid acidity of late appropriation strategies. It embraces the generic *Dream*, while not evading the smirking *facts*. Its incursions and probes magnify, distort, and otherwise redirect the viewer’s expectations concerning the link between dreams and pictorial images. An organizational logic, revealed in its own display of gates and cyphers, finally comes down to its last notch in being about *waking reality’s* relation to dreams, and indicates that the relation is

altered by a particular kind of picture. In the post-final pass, it is about the ratios that obtain between specific dreams and the *actual*. This, from one of Nietzsche’s more remarkable passages:

“What we experience in dreams—assuming that we experience it often—belongs in the end just as much to the over-all economy of our soul as anything experienced ‘actually’: we are richer or poorer on account of it, have one need more or less, and finally are led a little by the habits of our dreams even in broad daylight and in the most cheerful moments of our wide-awake spirit. Suppose someone has flown often in his dreams and finally, as soon as he dreams, he is conscious of his power and the art of flight as if it were his privilege, also his characteristic and enviable happiness. He believes himself capable of realizing every kind of arc and angle simply with the lightest impulse...”³

1. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
2. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*
3. Fredrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Frank Gillette
New York
March, 1991



THE FORTUNE OF A HAUNTED MIRROR, 1991,
2 panels 72" x 78", 50" x 22½",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

Checklist of paintings in show:

"Clouds, The Pomp of Antlers", 1990, 66" x 84",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"The Future Hermit, Twofold", 1990, 72" x 60",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"The Same Path, Saints Jest", 1990, 78" x 72",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"A Table's Dissolute Breathing", 1990, 70" x 54",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"The Blank Shrine's Benign Chasm", 1991, 27" x 60",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"The Guest, A Floating River", 1991, 72" x 84",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"The Invited Return, Unblest", 1991, 78" x 72",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"A Monk's Tonic, Meandering Heat", 1991 60" x 72"
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"The Fortune of a Haunted Mirror", 1991,
2 panels 72" x 78", 50" x 22½."
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas

"Beatific Walk, Skewed Midway", 1991, 66" x 66",
oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil on canvas